Lateral

Journal of the Cultural Studies Association

# Review of *Maroon Choreography* by fahima ife (Duke University Press)

by Walter Lucken IV | Book Reviews, Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT In *Maroon Choreography*, fahima ife follows the policing of Black and Indigenous life across Western modernity in a series of meditations on the "discipling" of the English language in literature and pedagogy, asking us to consider how the afterlife or afterlives of slavery and the present reality of coloniality echoes in our more closely held assumptions about the relationship between language and power. Each of the book's four sections meditates on a particular aspect of these contradictions, unpacking how certain intellectual projects and submerged knowledges cannot be understood in "disciplined English." These stylistic choices function on both a creative and critical level, leaving us with a text that will challenge a wide range of audiences across the humanities and be instructive in our classrooms and workshops.

KEYWORDS Black studies, decolonial, literature, pedagogy

*Maroon Choreography*. By fahima ife. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021, pp.144 (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1425-6. US List $22.95.

"What undocumented black indigenous knowledges emerged in the seventeenth century on Turtle Island?" asks fahima ife (x). She asks us this in *Maroon Choreography*'s prefatory note on how these knowledges "persist in our contemporary air," going on to explain that the book will indeed not answer either question, but rather "move inside the pneumatic feeling of fleeing in seventeenth-century black indigenous escape," (x) lingering there for the book's four sections.

These questions set the stage for *Maroon Choreography*'s primary thrust. In it, ife maps the conditioning and policing of Black and Indigenous bodies across

Western modernity through, beyond, and against the English language itself. In so doing, ife draws out the ways in which settler colonization—alongside slavery and its afterlives—takes shape both within and throughout the English language and its prescribed "norms" in writing and pedagogy. The experimental form ife employs throughout itself presents a series of arguments about the relationships between coloniality, slavery, and its afterlives, and the English language. Each section meditates on a particular aspect of this matrix of relationships, unpacking how certain fugitive registers remain unintelligible or illegible in "disciplined English." These stylistic choices function on both a creative and critical level, leaving us with a text that audiences across a wide range of fields will find challenging and instructive.

For ife, a body which refuses the choreography of the plantation complex, then, with a fugitive "anachoreography" of its own, is one which organizes its capacity for speech and writing against the racialized conventions of English. In this sense, ife shows us how speech and breath organize the capacity for language within the body itself, opening a path for the reader to imagine a fugitive counterhistory of the English language's career on Turtle Island. ife critiques the university as well, noting how "inside the academy there are fields and bodies," as well as "conversations on how those fields and bodies remain in isolation" (xi). In its juxtaposition with ife's notion that the "disciplined body" is one that moves within captivity's expectations for expression, we can begin to glimpse how the afterlife of slavery reproduces its violence within the grammars of academic knowledge production itself, particularly for those of us who study English language, literacy, and pedagogy.

The first, "recrudescence," introduces the reader to a world lush with vegetation that is hot, humid, and hidden from the Apollonian eye of coloniality, meditating on the uncommonly used term "recrudescence" which refers to the renewed outbreak of disease or return to an undesirable condition. The use of the term itself suggests a level of ambiguity, raising the question of whether the term is

suggestive of renewed conditions of oppression, or of renewed resistance. The world, ife shows us in this section, is one teeming with fugitive life and glistening possibility, ectoplasm, wet words, and secrets. This world is one in which undocumented Black Indigenous knowledges take shape in the shadows of English syntax—one beyond the reach of what ife terms choreography—as the "commands of writing." With its focus on plant life and the ways in which vegetation defies anthropocentric (and thus Eurocentric) conceptions of life and agency, "recrudescence" illustrates how even fugitive plant life refuses any system of ordering or taxonomy.

The second section, "porous aftermath," follows an unnamed family from the "liquid edge" between plantation and fecund swamp, through a zone between"between plantation memory and cosmic impulse" (17). By pointing to what seems at first glance to be an imagined past, ife draws the reader's attention to how Black collectivities negotiate time and the afterlives of slavery. The unnamed family of the second section moves through a series of scenes, from weeping in an "inside space" to a stunning couplet where ife summons "apex predator as human child," (26) calling to mind John Dilulio's 1995 specter of the "super predator," an imagined Black male juvenile offender who "can rape, kill, maim, without giving it a second thought," calling to our attention the reproduction of slavery's afterlives within contemporary public discourse, alongside its consequence for Black life in the present. Ending the section, ife returns to the vegetal, with the closing note that the family we follow through the section resolves "not to be a human," nor "seven fugitives," but "only trees" (48).

The third section, "nocturnal work," which considers the work of arts and letters itself—and how the realms of scholarly and cultural production make sense of coloniality and the afterlives of slavery—seems to step into a more complex system of verse, or rather a more multifaceted set of grammars and synaxes, beginning to push in a slightly more expository direction without drifting too far into what we might call a colonial legibility. This section, for me, had the

unexpected effect of showing that the myriad references to thinkers and texts from Black studies, which I had organized into a canon of sorts over the last few years, are, in a sense, a gesture of choreography. When I imagine a citational web of connections between Fred Moten and Eduoard Glissant, one which I might employ to make their thinking legible to an undergraduate student, I am in effect inscribing a certain "command of writing." By naming Moten, Glissant, and others but refusing to clarify the way they connect to each other within the section, ife teaches us that the "disciplined body" of even the early career humanities academic cannot fully grasp either. To this point, ife's poem "fleurs sauvages" (74) again collapses time and space, returning to the complex relationship between memory and the present as "anamnesis and soul airs" (65). Anamnesis, to my understanding, refers to the remembrance of a past life. To air, in the verb form, is to broadcast, be broadcasted, or project. What does it mean for soul and the remembrance of past lives to air in a maroon choreography? For want of a clear answer, which would run counter to how I understand the book's aim, I began to suspect in my journey through the book's third section that the notion of agency itself and the distinction between agents and subjects was perhaps blurrier than I thought. Maybe then, to air is to be aired, or to be air in the sense of being both present and absent.

The book's final section, the titular "maroon choreography," both approaches and unsettles essay form, taking shape in one long uninterrupted paragraph. In it, ife connects the books previous threads and re-connects its various thematic and stylistic elements into a more cohesive and organized statement about the relationship between racial-colonial power and the "disciplining" of language. I noticed that as the book's sections moved closer and closer to a writing style which I might consider legible—which is to say, choreographed—I began to see more and more what ife means in the introduction when she cautions the reader that the book will only work for readers who are themselves open. The experience of finding my trained impulses to search for explicit meanings, topic sentences, or even a larger grammar I could impose on the book's four sections butting against

a more vegetal and clandestine system of meaning eventually led me to read the entire book over again, in hopes that repetition and even reading the pages aloud might help me "arrive in communion," (xiiii)as ife puts it in the prefatory note. While ife's meditation on the relationship between language and power across modernity's *longue durée* resists a standard synopsis, toward the end she teaches us quite pointedly that even our most critical insights about language and power reproduce coloniality by organizing symbolic expressions of power and power itself into distinct categories. For those working at the intersection of pedagogy, cultural studies, literature, and the broader humanities, *maroon choreography* will be an invaluable occasion to question the foundations of our knowledge and practice and re-examine our basic assumptions. Scholars in Black, Latinx, and American Studies will find this book particularly indispensable as we come to a more reflective moment following the 2020 uprisings, and especially as we consider how the resources of our intellectual projects might contribute to the struggle for justice and decolonization in Palestine.

---

# Author Information

## Walter Lucken IV

Walter Lucken IV is Assistant Professor of English at Queens College of the City University of New York. His work focuses on public rhetorics of state violence, the academic humanities, and social movements. His previous writing has appeared in *Art & the Public Sphere*, *Refractions Journal*, *Community Literacy Journal*, and *Michigan Quarterly Review*. He lives in New York City.

View all of Walter Lucken IV's articles.

## Article details

Walter Lucken IV, "Review of *Maroon Choreography* by fahima ife (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 13.2 (2024).

https://doi.org/10.25158/L13.2.21

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

---

*Lateral* is the peer-reviewed, open access journal of the Cultural Studies Association.

ISSN 2469-4053